

REAPER  
REBORN



BOOK 3 OF THE REAPERS TRILOGY

REAPER  
REBORN

A NOVEL BY

BRYAN DAVIS

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Book 3 of The Reapers Trilogy

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## CHAPTER ONE

“WAKE UP, PHOENIX. You need to see this.”  
I opened my eyes. Shanghai slept with her head against my shoulder and her legs curled in my lap. My limbs tingled under her weight. Numbness reigned in mind and body.

Sing paced in front of my chair. Wearing a Sancta’s red cloak with a raised hood, she looked like a floating wave of scarlet. She held a sheet of creased yellow paper, her brow wrinkled with creases of its own as she studied the page.

I shifted to ease the tingles. “What is it?”

She stopped and looked at me. The whites of her eyes provided a stark contrast to her darker skin, a hue generated from the blended genetics of a Ghanaian father and a Japanese mother. Wearing forest green Reaper trousers and a black shirt under her cloak, she looked more like a woman ready for battle than did Sarah, the first Sancta I met.

“A coded message.” Sing turned the page toward me, revealing an unreadable string of dark letters. “Someone slipped it under the door during the night. I’m trying to decipher it.”

“Any progress?”

"It's from the Resistance. A warning of some kind. We should get ready to leave."

"Will do." I patted Shanghai's arm. "Wake up."

"Hmmm?" She opened her eyes and smiled. "What's going on?"

"Sing found a warning message from the Resistance. She's decoding it now."

Shanghai, also dressed in Reaper garb, climbed out of my lap and stretched her slender, toned body. Light from the window illuminated her taut face and intense eyes, accented by the slant bestowed by her Asian ancestors. "I guess the Resistance is still active."

Sing lowered her hood, releasing her dark curly locks. "Since the Gatekeeper died, I'm sure they've been discussing their next step, maybe to stage insurrections and topple any leader still loyal to him. Or to prepare for whatever Alex might do next." She continued reading the note. "Just a couple of more minutes."

Shanghai grasped my wrist and pulled me to my feet. As blood rushed to my legs, I lifted and lowered them in turn. After five days of lying in bed unconscious, they felt lifeless. They needed a good workout.

While Shanghai took the first turn in the bathroom, Sing folded the note and slipped it under her cloak. "The Resistance leaders are meeting in a secret location in Chicago. They want you to know that Alex is back in town, and her movements seem to be trained on you. She was seen near the Fife building right before the fire and then only a block away from this apartment. The leaders think you should go to a secure location."

"Suits me. If we can find a place. Though I don't like the idea of running from Alex."



Sing gave me a firm nod. "Good attitude. No retreat. We should shift to full attack mode. We could even set an ambush."

I drew my head back. "An ambush? What made you so warlike all of a sudden?"

"This *is* a war." She looked straight at me. "It's time to train your mind, but not with what we learned during Reaper school. We were taught how to escape bandits, how to protect the souls in our care. Our purpose was to defend, not to attack. You need a new mindset."

"Okay," I said with a prompting tone. "Go on."

"In the past, whenever you faced Alex, you always put yourself in protection mode. You know, trying to save people like the Fitzpatricks, Misty, Shanghai, and me. Normally, that's a good strategy for typical Reaper duties, but when dealing with Alex, it always puts you at a disadvantage. All she has to do is threaten someone you love, and she immediately cripples you. You have no choice but to play by her rules."

"So you want me to change that strategy?"

Sing nodded. "You have to kill Alex."

"Okay. I get that. But, like you said, what if she's threatening someone I love? That's her number one strategy. She's bound to do it again."

"No doubt she will." Sing narrowed an eye. "Focus only on the goal. If Alex lives, many will die, probably including anyone you try to save by hesitating to go on the offensive. Think about how many are already dead because of her — Misty, Colm, Kwame, camp prisoners. Not to mention the countless people who'll die once Alex begins her murderous march to control the world."

I let out a sigh. "Right. She's a murderer, and we have to stop her, but it'll be hard ignoring one of her threats to kill someone."

Sing cracked a smile. "Saving the world is never easy, hero boy."

When Shanghai came out of the bathroom, I took my turn. The water pressure was barely high enough to allow for a quick wash of hands and face and a swallow or two to quench my thirst. Yet, it sufficed.

While Sing looked out the apartment's window, Shanghai and I whipped on our weapons belts and fastened them. "I restocked your belt," Shanghai said. "Smoke capsules, lighter, two sharp knives, flashlight with fresh batteries, two spool lines, and the radiation-level band you got from the checkpoint guard. It's in your pouch."

I touched the pouch and felt for the band. "Got it."

"Kwame's watch is in there, too. I kept Alex's watch. Timepieces might come in handy."

I scanned the belt and spotted an empty pouch. "Have you seen my camera?"

"Um ..." She offered a sheepish smile. "I lost mine weeks ago, so I borrowed yours while you were recovering. I left it at the condo. I guess it got destroyed."

"No problem, but what did you need it for?"

"I was practicing ... a ... a speech, I guess. I made a recording with your camera." She touched her pants pocket. "I have the photo stick. Remind me to show it to you later."

I smiled. "Okay, mystery woman, but I'm going to be wondering what you're up to."

Someone pounded on the door. "Phoenix! Open up!"

I rushed to the peephole and looked out. A man with gray hair stood in the corridor, his head low, concealing his face. I called, "Who is it?"

"Bill. From the depot." He lifted his head, revealing his familiar bushy gray hair and eyebrows, but his face was raw, red, and peeling. Blood covered his throat and dampened his white sweatshirt.

I unlocked the door and threw it open. When Bill staggered in, I grabbed his wrist and guided him toward my reading chair while Sing closed the door and relocked it.

Shanghai ran toward the bathroom. "I'll get something to stop the bleeding."

By the time I helped Bill sit, Shanghai rushed back with a damp cloth. She stretched his sweatshirt at the shoulder, revealing a series of deep cuts, one of which bled profusely over a thin leather cord around his neck. She covered the deepest cut with the cloth and applied pressure. "Just sit still."

"What happened?" I asked.

Bill spoke with wheezing breaths. "We ... the Resistance leaders ... were meeting a few blocks away to discuss our plans. After a few minutes, clouds of radiant gas came from the ventilation system and covered us. It burned like crazy. When we tried to escape, intruders broke through the door and started beating us. They were invisible. Like ghosts. And they packed a punch." He angled his head and looked at the blood-drenched cloth. "I think they were metallic with sharp edges."

I glanced at Shanghai and Sing. "Illuminaries."

"Poison gas from the ventilation system," Shanghai said. "That's new."

Bill winced tightly. "Testing an efficient way to kill people, I suppose."

"Why did you come here?" I asked.

Bill's face turned pale, and he blinked several times, as if losing consciousness. "To warn you. Our top spy said your apartment will be bombed."

"Bombed? When? Who?"

"I don't know. I ..." His eyes rolled upward, and his head lolled to the side.

Sing ran to the door, unlocked it, and set a hand on the knob. "We have to find a doctor. Let's go."

"Got him." I gathered Bill into my arms and carried his limp body while Shanghai braced his head, the cloth still in place. "Maybe Dr. Rubenstein will help us."

Sing opened the door. Five paces away, two illuminaries stood in the hallway side by side. A slight purr proved that their engines were running, but no flashes emanated. The new models, far more deadly than the older ones, could probably turn that function on and off.

"They're just standing there," Shanghai said. "Like they're waiting for something."

"The bomb." I nodded toward the window. "That way. You two first. I'll pass Bill to you."

Shanghai ran to the window and lifted the sash, letting in a chilly breeze. After she and Shanghai climbed out to the fire escape, I passed Bill through the opening and joined them on the metal platform. The dawning sunlight illuminating the alley made it look like about seven or eight in the morning.

"I'll carry him firefighter style," I said. "Better for taking the stairs."

After Shanghai and Sing helped me lift Bill over my shoulder, Shanghai looked back through the window. "No one's coming."

"That's what worries me." I nodded toward the stairs. "You two first. I'll be right behind you."

Just as Shanghai and Sing began tromping down the metal steps, an explosion erupted behind me. The force sent Bill and me flying over the railing. With my free hand, I grabbed my spool claw and threw it toward the fire escape. When it hooked on the railing, I set the spool's brake and held on. The spool screamed. The line tightened, slowing my plunge.

I landed on my feet and rolled with Bill on the alley floor. When we stopped, I lay on my back with him on my chest. Above, smoke spewed through a gaping hole that was once my window. Brick fragments and glass shards rained in a wide circle, a few striking the ground near my feet. The fire-escape frame swayed, its fastening brackets torn from the bricks, and my claw lay on the ground.

Shanghai and Sing ran to my side and knelt. "Are you all right?" Shanghai asked as they lifted Bill.

"I think so." I rolled out from under him, and the three of us carried him to the side of the building. His eyes were still open, giving me hope.

Once we laid him down, I knelt and checked for a pulse at his neck. Nothing. I set my ear against his chest and listened. No heartbeat. No respiration.

I straightened and looked at Shanghai and Sing as they settled on their knees next to me. "He's dead."

Tears gleaming, Shanghai closed Bill's eyelids. Her voice squeaked as she said, "What should we do with him?"

"Can you reap him?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Tokyo taught me how to reap a ghost, not a soul who's still attached. Without energy, I can't dematerialize my hand and push it into his brain."

Sing ran her fingers through Bill's hair. "We'll have to leave him here and let him self-detach. Maybe you can collect him later."

I gazed at Bill's red, peeling face. In spite of its ravaged state, it seemed noble, virtuous. I had no idea how well connected he was with the higher levels of the Resistance. "I guess since the Resistance leaders are dead, the followers won't know what to do."

"True." Sing's shoulders sagged. "It looks like we're on our own."

Something thudded from my apartment, though nothing appeared at the blown-out window. "We should go," I said as I reeled in my spool line. "The illuminaries are bound to search for us in the damage. When they don't find us, they might come down here."

Shanghai watched my line's claw drag toward me. "That move you made while falling was incredible. I guess you already have your reflexes back. Maybe better than ever."

"Just instinct." I hooked the claw to my belt and looked at the window again. Still no sign of the illuminaries. "Let's bolt."

"Just a second." Sing lifted the leather cord around Bill's neck and drew it over his head. A roughly cut wooden cross dangled at the bottom of a worn boot lace tied to make a necklace. Sing laid the cross in her palm and gazed at it. Stained with blood, it covered most of her hand.

After whispering quietly for a moment, she pushed the cross into her pants pocket and said, "I'm ready."

We hurried from the alley in silence. My legs feeling surprisingly strong, I led Shanghai and Sing along a sidewalk void of any other pedestrians, an odd sight at this time of the morning. The cracked concrete path skirted a row of brick-walled apartment buildings, many vandalized by vulgar graffiti and rude drawings scrawled by local wielders of paint or chalk. Their words and art reflected the sorry state of their existence — dark and hopeless.

Adding to the dismal thoughts, Bill's death weighed heavily on my mind. The poor old man had stationed himself at the depot for years, dutifully warning Reapers about the evils taking place at the Gateway. I had always thought he was just a crackpot, a crazed conspiracy theorist who had nothing better to do than to bother real-world people with his loony ideas.

Now I knew better. He was a soldier for a just cause, not minding his menial task or the ridicule that pelted him on a daily basis. He was doing his part. He was a hero.

I shook my head to cast off the gloom. With Alex and her illuminaries on the march, we had to hurry. I picked up the pace. "Let's head to Eggs & Stuff and see if anyone knows where Liam is. We have to gather whatever allies we have."

My two companions matched my gait. When we turned onto a sidewalk next to a main road, we jogged parallel to a line of nearly bumper-to-bumper cars, inching along in a haze of exhaust smoke. A fear-stoked evacuation was in progress.

A ghost approached from the opposite direction, a man wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, probably a recent execution victim. His semitransparent body and glowing

eyes gave away his dead status, and his menacing scowl revealed a violent streak.

Shanghai grimaced. "I don't want to reap that thug, especially with no energy."

"Let him go," I said. "We don't want to attract attention. Besides, he's just a level one, not experienced enough to hurt anyone yet."

When the ghost drew near, he turned and crossed the street, passing through a car before hurrying on. Farther down the walkway, several other ghosts came into view, most huddled under canopies or building overhangs, demonstrating a desire to be covered by something, typical for many low-level ghosts.

Shanghai's eyes darted. "The ghost population is soaring. I see one ... two ... three level ones. No. More than that. Pretty much everyone around here is a ghost."

On the walkway ahead, a phantom young woman wearing overalls and a baseball cap crept past a liquor store, bending low as if trying not to be seen. A man and a boy chatted as they walked with an umbrella over their heads, like a father escorting a son to school, both apparently unaware of their dead status.

As we passed them, I looked each ghost over. "They're too young for natural causes."

"And they're not the type we normally see at executions," Shanghai said. "Last night's fire at the Fife building, maybe?"

"Or they're executing everyone in the prisons and corrections camps and tossing them into the cremation ovens."

Shanghai nodded. "Fire makes souls jump out in a hurry."



A gust of cold air prompted me to raise my hood. "Alex is spreading fear. A panicked city is vulnerable. Chicago's about to burn, and a lot of people know it. That's why they're trying to leave town."

Still jogging at my side, Sing glanced around, her brow bent low. "You're right. We should ignore the ghosts and get ready for Alex."

"Any idea what our next step should be?" I asked Sing.

"Well, I have been waiting for —"

A siren blared a short blast.

Sing nodded. "There it is."

A second blast followed, then a third and a fourth — the signal for a video bulletin.

"Strange timing," Shanghai said. "The Gatekeeper's dead. The government's in chaos. Why signal an announcement?" She looked at Sing. "And how did you know it was coming?"

"Actually I thought it would come sooner. Alex has always stayed a step ahead of us, so I'm trying to predict her moves. By now she knows that you two survived the bomb and can tell the world the truth about what she did at the Gateway. She needs to neutralize you in the public eye. My guess is she'll use the announcement to do that."

My legs still stronger than expected, I pushed on. "That sounds like her style, a personal message that starts a new chess match."

"I agree," Shanghai said. "But bombing the apartment and setting fire to the Fife building aren't like her. She flaunts her power. She wants to be in your face, not hiding and killing in secret."

"True, but the illuminaries were there. Alex controls them."

“Maybe she has someone working with her.” Shanghai shrugged. “I can’t imagine who, though.”

Bartholomew the depot attendant came to mind. Since he was probably behind my parents’ murders, he might be trying to make me his next victim, guessing that I had talked to my father’s soul by now. But with no evidence beyond my father’s word, it was better to delay airing my suspicions. “I’ll keep thinking about it. Let’s just see what Alex has to say. Eggs & Stuff will show the broadcast.”

Shanghai nodded toward the line of cars, still snaking along at a slow pace. “Looks like some people aren’t going to bother watching. Maybe they’ll pick it up on their car radios.”

After zigzagging from one side street to another, we arrived at the restaurant, pulled the front of our hoods down over our eyes, and entered the main door. More than fifty people sat or stood watching a television mounted at a ceiling corner. Most wore coats and hats to ward off the chill that the restaurant’s fireplace had not been able to quell.

A short, bearded man wearing a baseball cap looked our way and nudged a taller man next to him. As every head turned toward us, the word *Reapers* passed across the eating area in a cascade of gasps and murmurs from faces bent in anger.

Shanghai leaned close to me and whispered, “I don’t think we’re welcome here.”